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A GIRL OF THE PERIOD.

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With Illustrations by R. A. BELL.

CHAPTER I.



BLANCHE FONTAINE was a girl who was not very happy at home : at least she thought so, which in many cases comes to the same thing. She was the only child of her parents, who believed on their side that no girl in England had so many reasons for being happy. They had no other object so dear to their hearts as this : that their child should be surrounded with everything that is best and most delightful in life ; that she should have not a wish that was unfulfilled (within limitations, of course) ; that she should know everything and see everything that a young lady moving in the best society ought to know and see. And they spared themselves no trouble in this desire for Blanche's happiness. Many long vacations which the Judge would have given a great deal to spend at home in his house in the country, resting from his many labours, he had spent instead in Italy, when it was too hot, or in Switzerland when it was too wet, for pleasure, in order to please Blanche. In winter or spring he was often left alone for months together in his big dull old London house on the same argument. As for Lady Fontaine no washerwoman toiled more constantly than she did in the ceaseless effort to perfect and satisfy her child—"the only flower of my garden," she would say with hands clasped and soft eyes turned to heaven. She was a pretty woman herself, very apt to be admired and applauded on her own account, just forty when Blanche was nineteen ; but her ambition was all for her daughter. She had not herself been carefully educated, and had resolved that her child should have everything she had lacked ; and when Blanche ceased to be a child, and set up independent ways of thinking and ambitions of her own, Lady Fontaine was (at first) much delighted. She was continually telling her husband how original the child was, what character she had, so unconventional, always taking a way of her own. The Judge admired both of them, and thought them more delightful than any other created beings. To see them together was to him the most charming picture : and he loved to see the little rebellions of the girl, her assertions of herself. It pleased him more than anything when she defied himself, and proved to him that he knew nothing, and that all his views of life were out of date—"That little thing !" he said with a chuckle of pride and pleasure.

Now Blanche had not the least idea of being treated as a little thing. "What I feel so much," she said to one of her friends, "is that though they are fond of me, and I know very good to me, it is all in a selfish way—I mean it is for themselves and not for me. Don't you see the difference? They want to have me

always with them, either at home, or going with me when I go anywhere. Now you know that is quite destructive of anything like independence. How am I to get any experience of my own, to form any views, if I have always my father and mother keeping the wind from blowing on me, on either side?"

The friend to whom she was speaking was not, as the old-fashioned reader may suppose, a girl like herself, but a man, and this man not a lover so far as Blanche was aware (indeed I believe honestly that she had never bestowed a thought upon the subject whether he was or was not so), but only a friend who agreed in some of the young lady's opinions, and was in the course of indoctrinating her with many of his own. He was a kind of man captivating to the maiden imagination of the present day as the young soldier was to that of an earlier and milder development of womankind—a man of literature, chiefly journalistic, saying his say daily in the papers, and thus influencing, as he himself half fictitiously, and his feminine friend most sincerely, believed, not only the opinions but the action of the world. He laughed a little as Blanche spoke, eying her from under his eyelids with looks that meant a great deal—much more than she was as yet aware.

"I have heard," he said, "that the only way of real love was so, to love you not for your sake but for one's own—because life was not possible without you: that's the highest compliment don't you think?"

"Oh, love!" she cried impatiently, though with a quick blush, "that is such a different thing! I was speaking of my father and mother;" she said this with calm conviction, as if any feeling that actuated them could belong only to a much inferior kind of sentiment.

"What you say is an interesting view," she added after a moment. "It has a specious air of truth about it; it is the old-fashioned kind of compliment, isn't it? belonging to the time when a girl always replied to a man who proposed to her that she never could be grateful enough for the honour he did her, &c.—don't you know?"

"Oh, yes, I know—Miss Austen's young ladies and so forth. But if you come to think of it, poor creatures as men are—that's allowed, I believe—it is the highest compliment the wretched fellow can pay you."

"What?" cried the young lady, "to ask a girl who perhaps has been very well taken care of all her life to step off from her pedestal and take care of him! to follow him wherever he likes to go, perhaps to India, for instance, she who has been the leader herself ever since she remembers! Is that what you call the greatest honour, the highest compliment, &c.? I don't see it in that light."

He laughed again, but with a discomfited air. "Let us hope he would not mean anything so dreadful. Put it another way: what he might mean would be to take care of you better than you ever had been taken care of before, to be your constant guardian and defender, to work for you all his life."

"Thank you," said Blanche, "or rather thank him," she added with another vivid blush which dyed her face for the moment, "this imaginary person! I shall be well enough off I suppose: I shall not want any man to work for me. However this is a



BLANCHE AND MR. DEWSBURY.

complete digression ; what I was saying was about fathers and mothers. Men are so much better off that they scarcely ever understand a girl's feelings on the subject. Sons are allowed to take up the struggle of life for themselves."

"Oh, very much so indeed," said Mr. Dewsbury with a laugh.

"Your parents treated you so?" cried Blanche. "Well, then you never can understand how fettered a girl is, how unable to move a step one way or another, how continually kept in a kind of hot-bed, shut out from life. Ask your sister how she feels on the subject—that is, if you have a sister."

He laughed again in a curious way, with an evident sense of something ludicrous in the question which was altogether hidden from Blanche. "Yes," he said, "I have indeed more sisters than one; but they are very simple country girls. I don't think they have ever thought of that side of the question."

"Ah!" cried Blanche, "if there are two of them that will probably make a great difference, they will side with each other. Two against two is fairer than two against one. What did you say, mother? Am I ready? I really should like to stay half an hour longer if you don't mind—I am in the middle of a most interesting conversation."

"It shall be just as you like, my darling," said Lady Fontaine; "but remember your father and I are waiting, don't be longer than you can help." As she moved away through the groups of the crowded room Blanche turned again to her companion.

"You see!" said that young lady with a slight elevation of her eyebrows. "I never can be allowed to forget the chain at my foot; you would not submit to that for a day."

"But you don't want to walk home at your own time, to call at your club on the way, to go in with your latch key?"

"Why not?" cried the girl, "there is nothing wrong in any of these things. Yes, that is just what I should like—to feel the air blowing on my face and know that I was free!"

"My dear Miss Fontaine—well, there is one way of securing that, you know."

"What way?" she cried with a little eagerness.

He laughed, and to do him justice coloured a little too. "In Miss Austen's time," he said, "—and indeed I hear elderly ladies sometimes do it now—the men were advised to marry when they made complaint of their forlorn freedom, which is often our view of the subject you know. And perhaps I ought to apologize for recommending it to a young lady. But to be bold—marry, Miss Fontaine! that is the way to freedom."

"Marry!" she cried half contemptuous, half abashed.

"I heard somebody say the other day," he added hurriedly, "that there was no such freedom as that of a young married woman—that she could go everywhere, do everything, walk out at night, look in wherever she pleased, see life as much as she liked—in short do anything: with her husband."

"Ah!" cried Blanche clasping her hands, "now you have spoilt it all! I was getting quite excited. With her husband! What is that but the old slavery again under another form?"

"I should not say that," said Dewsbury; "it is quite the reverse of course, from my point of view."

"The point of view of the man who has the other end of the chain!"

"Not so, Miss Fontaine. Don't you think that two comrades going everywhere together are much more jolly than one alone?"

"Ah, comrades!" she said.

"My authority, whom I have already quoted, says there is no such *camaraderie* as that between two young people married; and it stands to reason don't you know—a man and a woman get on together much better than two men, or two women. I assume," he added, once more laughing, "that this is a well-established fact."

"I fully believe," said Miss Fontaine with grave decision, "that there is no such sound friendship as that between a man and a woman."

"So our old Master at Oxford always said. He was not perhaps himself a lovely object."

"As if women only thought of what was lovely!"

"Well, perhaps not. I think I do myself; but that is no doubt a weakness. Still there is no harm, I suppose, in being youngish, and decent-looking."

"Oh, no harm whatever," cried Blanche with a laugh. Something flashed in her eyes at the moment and made her perceive that Mr. Dewsbury answered perfectly to this description—nay, went beyond it. He was more than youngish and decent-looking. He was young and rather handsome than otherwise. She made this observation quite involuntarily and blushed as she made it: she was, as she said herself, "dreadful for blushing," the colour coming at a word, and so often when it was particularly inconvenient that it should do so. At this moment (with no will of hers) he showed himself to her in quite a new light. She perceived with startled instinct that it was himself of whom he was speaking; and she felt sure that with those exceedingly keen eyes of his looking from under the eyelids in their peculiar way, he could see that she had perceived it. Poor Blanche, just then perceiving with double force that other uncomfortable consequence of being a woman, felt herself glow suddenly all over with a heat and flush which dazzled her eyes as if they had been the reflection of a flame.

"Good-night," she said suddenly putting out her hand, "my father does not like to be kept waiting. I must go now."

"Let me take you to Lady Fontaine," he said, offering his arm.

But Blanche did not desire to present herself before her parents leaning upon Mr. Dewsbury's arm—leaning upon anybody's arm! What old-fashioned folly! as if a girl could not walk through a crowded room without protection. She was at the other end of the great drawing-room gathering up her mother's train before Dewsbury's arm had time to straighten itself—a will-o'-the-wisp! flashing in her white dress through all the serried ranks. He smiled to himself as he stood watching her, feeling that he had successfully sowed a few seeds in that young lady's mind to-night.

CHAPTER II.

MR. EDWARD DEWSBURY had attained an honour unto which he was not born when he put on the wig and gown of a barrister and acquired the right to plead in Her Majesty's Courts of Law. He kept a discreet silence as to his antecedents, and nobody had ever heard him make any local allusions such as could identify one district rather than another as having been the place of his birth. There was indeed one person whom he spoke of sometimes as his guardian, sometimes as "the friend who brought me up," whose name was to be found among the names of other recognized persons, a Mr. Flete, of some manor or other, whom he visited occasionally. It is true that he had allowed to Blanche Fontaine, in a moment when he was off his guard, that he had sisters: but she did not repeat this to trouble anybody's preconceived ideas: and the general opinion entertained of Dewsbury was that he was an orphan whose estate or property had been left in Mr. Flete's hands. He had been at one of the smaller colleges in Oxford and had done very well; he had also done well on leaving it; and he was now a man thriving somewhat at the bar, and in the meantime supporting himself by general literature and the *Piccadilly Evening Light*. He wrote very smartly on a number of subjects, and was considered "a power" in several of the houses to which he had gained admittance, introduced by other young men whom he had known at college or met on circuit. Nobody's acquaintance with him was older than this, or more intimate; but that of course was a thing not publicly recognized, nor thought of in the society to which he had made his way. Sir William Fontaine's was a house of which he had gradually grown an *habitué*, nobody very well knowing why. The Judge thought he was a meritorious young man, with a very good knowledge of the law; and Lady Fontaine had found him very useful at theatres and other places where it was difficult to find her carriage. He was a very handy man in many ways. If he heard her speak of anything she wanted, he remembered weeks after and took the liberty of getting it for her when an occasion occurred; and he refrained from paying any special court to Blanche when she first made her appearance in society, for which both her parents were grateful to him. They went on indeed thinking for a long time that Mr. Dewsbury had only a sort of paternal kindness for their daughter, which was perhaps rather remarkable, considering that there was but a dozen years or so between them in point of age, which, as everybody knows, is only enough to put a young man and a young woman upon a level. This was Blanche's

own idea, who thought herself at twenty "just about the same age" as the clever contributor to the *Evening Light*: who was in reality half a world older not only than she, but than her mother, and even the Judge himself. He looked upon them all as innocents if the truth were known, and was fully minded to make them stepping-stones in his upward career. But this was not thought of in Portland Place when that terrible trouble rose between Blanche and her parents, and she thought herself the most ill-used girl in the world.

It arose in this way. Blanche had a pretty talent for drawing, of which both the Judge and Lady Fontaine were very proud. Lady Fontaine's boudoir, which was a very pretty and dainty little room, was hung with what she called "my daughter's works," as if the girl had been a Raphael. They had allowed it to be said to them, and they had themselves said with bated breath, that their child was a child of genius, and that had it not been that she had no need of such vanities, the world would soon have heard of her. They were of opinion—both, though the Judge ought to have known better—that genius was sufficient, and that to arrive at the head of a profession needed nothing but that heaven-born gift. I think Blanche would have been very willing to think so too; but, in an unlucky moment, it occurred to Lady Fontaine to ask of a well-known artist that he would come and see "my daughter's works." The artist came, lunched and talked and made himself very agreeable. He thought (or at least he said) that the "works" as hung in the boudoir were very pretty, and smiled most kindly upon the young student. "To draw as much as that will always be a pleasure to you," he said benignly, admiring them with a smile upon his face. "To draw as much as that!" What did he mean? For at home the Judge and his wife thought better of Blanche than of many an R.A. The girl, hot with curiosity and emulation, intent upon knowing exactly what he meant, and on showing him that she could do better than what she called "those old things," brought him in a special portfolio, her latest and choicest productions; and at these the critic lifted his eyebrows and pondered, giving forth at last such a thunderbolt as had never fallen in that house before. He said these remarkable words: "This is another pair of shoes altogether. My dear Miss Fontaine, you ought to learn to draw."

To learn—to draw!

I will not venture to describe the scene that followed, the astonishment, the indignation, the dismay. Blanche became pale and Lady Fontaine red. The mild mother was like a dove enraged, the impetuous daughter was silenced. Learn—to draw! It was as much as that Academician's life was worth: but the man had the courage of his opinions. "So long as she does only that sort of thing," he said, waving his hand all round at the beautiful pictures, "my daughter's works," upon the wall, "it doesn't matter; they're very pretty little things, and that's all right; but when an uneducated girl does a thing like this out of her own head—"

"And pray, sir," said Lady Fontaine, "what do you suppose she should do it out of? Would you have my daughter copy from some one else—with her genius? And if you think Blanche is an uneducated girl—"

"I am sure Miss Fontaine is a most accomplished young lady," said the R.A., "and she has got a very good notion of colour—"

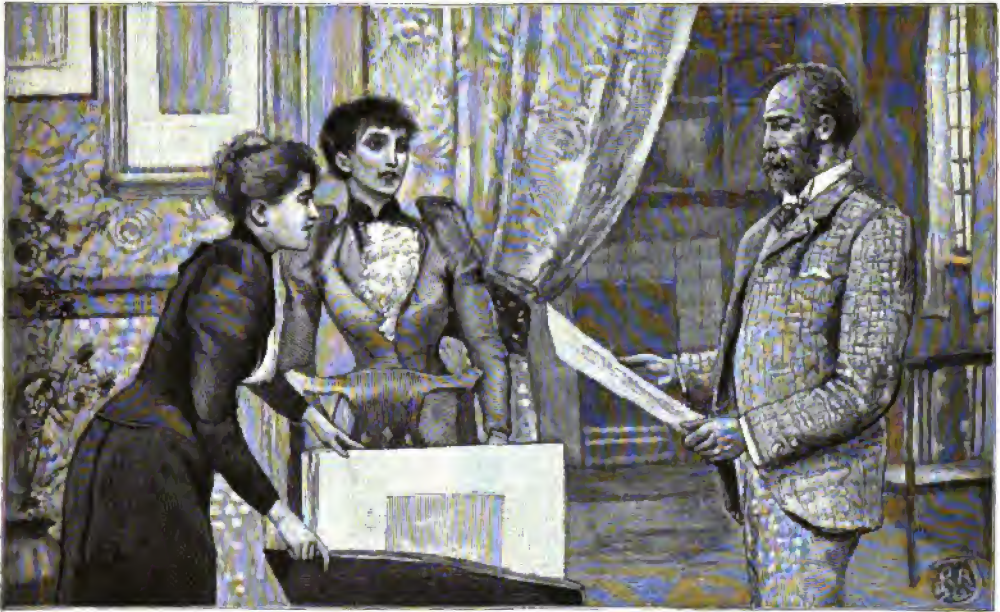
"Well then, what do you mean when you tell me—"

"—but," he went on doggedly, "and it's a great pity—she doesn't know how to draw."

Blanche did not say a word. She gathered up her sketches into her portfolio trembling, and she cast a glance of hate and horror at the walls of her mother's pretty room, where all her "works" had turned suddenly into "pretty little things." Pretty little things! those pictures of castles and villages and woods and waters, which they all thought good enough (if not too good) for Burlington House! Scarcely a word was to be got from Blanche all the rest of that day and night; but next morning she electrified her parents by informing them that it was quite indispensable she should spend the next season in Paris, where she wished to place herself in M. Fleur-de-Chaux's studio in order to learn to draw. The Judge, whom of course his wife had informed at length of Mr. Lake's unparalleled rudeness and ignorance, burst forth into a guffaw, and Lady Fontaine cried "Blanche!" in a voice that might have been heard in the street. But it was in vain that the parents laughed or stormed or argued, she stood to it with the determination of a martyr. Blanche had made up her mind to draw or die. Nothing that Mr. Lake could have said equalled her scorn,

her contempt for her previous work. "Call those things drawings?" she cried, with a white face and red eyes. The Judge had scarcely had his laugh out when he saw how serious it was.

To go to Paris into M. Fleur-de-Chaux's studio, she, a young lady in the best society, at the beginning of the season, when all the world was flocking into London, and invitations were coming in every day! to work ten hours a day (which was what Blanche stated as the easiest possible hours) among all the vagrants of art that flock to such places! It was impossible, impossible! Lady Fontaine demanded with tears whether her child, her only child, wanted to break her heart, to leave her alone; but Blanche was not moved by the pathos of the situation. "You have got papa," said the heartless girl; and she did not hesitate to state to her mother the conviction, which she had already revealed to Edward Dewsbury, that the love of her parents was a selfish love, and that they cared for her not on her account but on their own. Lady Fontaine did not answer this terrible accusation so wisely as Dewsbury did. She was one of the women to whom the very name of selfishness is a terrible thing, and who



THE ARTIST'S CRITICISM.

would almost rather be guilty of a crime than be supposed to desire anything for her own sole gratification. There were a great many dreadful scenes, and Lady Fontaine was moved to take into her confidence the most dangerous counsellor she could have hit upon, that extremely sensible person, Mr. Dewsbury, who was Blanche's friend. Lady Fontaine was a woman of her century too, in a way. She believed in such friendships; and thought it most prejudiced, gross, and coarse-minded, not to say old-fashioned, of those who did not. She told Mr. Dewsbury all about it, and begged him to use his influence with Blanche. "For she knows you must be quite disinterested, and she will listen to what you say to her," the unsuspecting mother said.

Mothers should never be unsuspecting when their daughters are in question: this was what the Judge said to her when one fine day Mr. Dewsbury called on Sir William before dinner and requested his consent to his marriage with Blanche. The young man did everything in the most perfect good taste, nobody could say that his conduct was not that of a gentleman. He explained that: feeling himself in so many ways her inferior, he could not address himself to Blanche without her father's consent; and he hastened, notwithstanding the Judge's frown, to lay bare his circumstances, how much he was already making a year, and how much he hoped to make. He was not able to offer great settlements such as Sir William's daughter had a right to expect, but—

"Don't you think you are going a little too fast, Mr. Dewsbury?" said Sir William in his gruffest voice. "It is time enough to talk of settlements when you are in the position of an accepted lover; and we are as yet a long way from that. You don't seem to see that I might have grave objections to giving you my daughter at all."

"That is surely for the young lady herself to settle, sir," said the lover.

"There are some suits that are never allowed to come to a young lady's ears," cried Sir William angrily.

"I think you'll allow that that is bad law, sir," said the other with a smile of imperturbable temper, "no arrangement, as you know, can stand that is done without the consent of both the principals."

"I do not allow that Miss Fontaine is one of the principals," said the angry Judge.

"Ah!" cried the suitor, "but then you have not fully entered into the case. I have not said anything to your daughter on the subject yet: but after all that has passed between us, I should be treating Miss Fontaine in a most unwarrantable manner if I did not make her a principal. A man cannot break off in such a case, unless he receives his dismissal."

"You don't seem afraid of that!" cried the Judge in a towering rage.

"Miss Fontaine, sir, is not a girl to draw a man on, and then to cast him off."

"To draw a man on! My daughter!"

"You forget, Sir William, that I have been allowed lately to see a great deal of Miss Blanche."

Oh, yes, of course! It was the mother's fault! When was there a case of the kind in which it could not be said that it was more or less the mother's fault? They like to see young men fluttering about, to make



"IT WAS QUITE INDISPENSABLE THAT SHE SHOULD SPEND THE NEXT SEASON IN PARIS." PAGE 422.

them fetch and carry, to drag a set of captives at their chariot wheels! Poor Lady Fontaine was the last person in the world to drag captives at her chariot wheels, but the angry Judge did not discriminate. He fell upon her as soon as Dewsbury was gone and sacrificed her as the handiest victim; and as Blanche was made the witness during the dreadful dinner which followed of her mother's tortures, the cause of them could not long be concealed from her. Nor, need I say, was it long before Dewsbury found an opportunity of pouring his suit into her own ear. The Judge in his passion had not attempted to bind him by any promise, nor probably would he have given any. They met in many places, though no longer in Portland Place, and Blanche, it must be allowed, found it highly amusing to have this little drama going on, though she would not perhaps have used those words. And it went against every principle of her creed to allow a man who loved her to be sent away by her father. What had her father to do with it? It was not he whose happiness was in question. The mere idea of settling the matter thus without consulting her was enough to drive her to any extremity. And I must say that the house in Portland Place was in these circumstances anything but a home of peace. They would force her to be constantly with them, these tyrannical parents, to go out with her mother when she wanted to stay at home, to remain indoors with her mother when she wanted to go out. What is a mother that she should thus annihilate the personal

freedom of a grown-up individual, with personal rights as strong as her own—a mere accidental relation—who had not chosen Blanche or been selected by her, in the only way in which such mutual bonds can have any real weight !

CHAPTER III.

I COULD not say with truth that Blanche loved her energetic and persistent lover. It would scarcely be true even to say that she was "in love" with him, which is a different matter. But to have him there in the midst of her discontent, a confidant to whom she could tell everything, to whom every detail was interesting, who was never weary of hearing her talk about herself and expound her views, was a distraction and consolation unspeakable. What he wanted, she felt sure, was her own advantage not his, and that she should please herself, and carry out her own wishes—very different from the parents who desired nothing but that she should constantly be with them. Blanche indeed did not represent to herself very clearly what should be done after she was married, if it were by any means possible to wrest a consent to her marriage out of her father and mother. Whether she expected that he would yield in that matter of going to Paris for instance, which had been the great question—before the greater question arose of his acceptance as her husband:—whether he would have less objection than her parents had to let her go off alone, and live, as she said, her own life:—even a young woman of advanced principles does not require to be logical, and that problem was lost in the rush of others still more delicate to solve. It may be asked how it was that in these circumstances she had the opportunity of meeting Dewsbury at all ; to which the only reply is that Lady Fontaine was, like her daughter, a woman of her time. She could not behave like an unnatural mother of the dark ages, and coerce her child. She would not even condescend to let the young man see that she was afraid of him. All that she could do was to avoid the houses in which she was likely to meet him : but he was too clever a man to lose a chance in that way. He breathed his story into the ears of here and there a lady of their mutual acquaintance : and there was scarcely one of them who did not throw herself on the side of the lovers. It was during a prolonged interview thus procured, while Lady Fontaine was held in conversation by her hostess in another room, that Blanche first introduced a subject which made Mr. Dewsbury wince. The season was drawing to an end, and they were both of opinion that something ought to be done to settle the question, though they could not decide upon the best means to be employed. It was however with an idea in her mind which she did not think fit to explain that Blanche began to question about his family the man who was so anxious to gain entrance into her own. Dewsbury was as much startled as if she had put a pistol to his head—all the more as there was in her look a something of mysterious meaning which he could not fathom.

"My family ! Oh, have they been talking to you of my family ?" he said.

"Nobody has talked about them, and that is why I want to know ; for who would be so likely to help us, Edward—unless indeed you think they would object to me."

"Object to you ! Who could object to you ? But I do not think they could help us, my darling. My family," he said, looking at her keenly, "are—you must find it out one time or other, Blanche—very humble folk."

"Are they ?" she said indifferently, "but that's not what I care about. Tell me something about them—I want to know."

"What do you want to know, my best and dearest ? They would think you a fairy princess, they would feel as I do—"

"Oh," she said with a quick breath of impatience, "if you would only understand it's not that sort of thing I want ! Where do they live ? How many are there of them ? You have a father and mother, Edward ?"

"Yes—like most other people," he said.

"And sisters ?—you told me once two sisters."

"Very well," he replied with a troubled smile. "Yes—you have a good memory, Blanche—I have two sisters."

"And where do they live ?" she asked, as if it were the most natural thing in the world : and so it was, though it was so embarrassing. His smile became a sort of grin of enforced endurance. "If you think of going to see them the Judge and Lady Fontaine would never hear of it," he said.

"Oh, never mind what I am thinking of! I don't know where you were born or what your home is. Tell me, Edward. I want to make a picture to myself. Oh!" she cried with impatience, "only to myself you know—for I can't draw, though I have been doing nothing else all my life!"

"My poor little martyr," he said, hoping to draw her attention from the other subject; but Blanche was not to be balked: and finally she succeeded in getting from him the name of his father's house. It was, she remarked, nodding her head with satisfaction, a pretty name. Woodlands Farm. He had meant to say Woodlands only, but in his confusion brought forth the whole with the look of a man making his last confession, Blanche did not know why. She conjured up the image of a fine old-fashioned red brick house buried in verdure and flowers. The Bertrams in the Thames Valley, those very rich people, called their very, very smart house that people went to see, a farm. She was not in the least startled. And she did not rest till she had made out the entire address. Fountain-Bridge—that was very pretty, very quaint and picturesque too: she told him with a look of pleasure that she could see it in her mind's eye—the name was a picture in itself. And he parted from her devoutly hoping that it was only for this girlish satisfaction that she had pursued him into the last of corners, and forced him to deliver that secret of his life. Pray heaven the fantastic girl meant nothing more!

Alas! Blanche meant a great deal more. It was, as has been said, nearly the end of the season, and she was aware vaguely of the family plans upon which this year she had not been consulted. They meant to carry her off to the ends of the earth, or at least as near that as the Judge could be persuaded to go. I do not know exactly what Lady Fontaine meant by the ends of the earth—perhaps it was only the Tyrol; for she was not bold enough for a long voyage or to take Blanche round the world. Enough had breathed out into the atmosphere however to alarm the girl, and she felt that the time had come for her to act on her own account. Soon it would become a matter of impossibility to see Edward, to have a word with any one who would take her side: for I need scarcely say that Blanche's friends in general looked upon her, not as the victim of her parents' selfish affection, but as a spoiled child of fortune whose every vagary her adoring family was ready to yield to. The interval of the Long Vacation was a very alarming one for Dewsbury also, but he could not suggest any way of escape, and could only implore his beloved to stand fast, not to throw him over. Blanche had felt with increasing conviction for some time past that she must take the matter into her own hands. And it was not a thing which she had the least objection to do. She had always wished indeed, as the reader knows, to distinguish herself by individual action, by taking her life into her own hands: and for some time she had been turning over the matter in her own mind, confiding her intentions to nobody, not even to Edward. Her plan at last was fully worked out, and she thought she had found at once the easiest and the safest way.

She went out one morning with a bag in her hand, while Lady Fontaine was busy with her housekeeper in their daily consultation over the *menu* and other household affairs. Blanche was very apt to despise these consultations—as if an intelligent woman, as she said, could find nothing better to do than to contrive a new dish! But she was grateful at the present moment for anything that delivered her from her mother's watchful eye. It was late in July, for the Judge could not get away till the Courts rose. It was a beautiful fresh morning, cooler than is usual at that time of the year, and the trees were greener than usual, and the grass had not been burned brown in the parks by reason that it had been an unusually wet season, as it so often is at the present day. Blanche went out with something of the feeling of an adventurer going forth to seek new worlds. She was a little afraid of meeting anybody she knew as she went quickly along with her bag in her hand; and a little, just a little afraid that somebody might speak to her, or be rude to her, though she knew not why, such ideas having been always presented to her mind as the penalty of going anywhere alone. But neither in the streets nor at the railway station did anybody take the least notice of Blanche. She was not a beauty of the overpowering kind (with which, I confess, I am not familiar) who cannot go anywhere without being stared out of countenance or followed by eager admirers; though she was indeed a pretty creature enough. It is my opinion however that a girl going quietly about her own business is as safe as if she were fifty, and so Blanche found. She had carefully looked out Fountain-Bridge in *Bradshaw*. It was a little insignificant station in Hampshire, not very easy to find

at all, and at which few of the trains stopped. It was about noon when she arrived there, in the full flush of the day; and except herself there was but one person who got out upon the little platform. This was a—what was she? a young woman, certainly not a lady, a good many years older than Blanche, dressed in a sort of travesty of the simple dress which Blanche wore, so that an ignorant and indiscriminating male creature might have supposed that they were dressed alike. This young person regarded Blanche with very curious eyes as she set out hesitating from the railway station. She had decided that it was better not to ask the way to Woodlands there, but to wait until she met some one on the road; but there was something in the uncertainty of her movements which showed that she did not know her way, wherever she might be going. This was not at all the case with the other, who moved briskly forward, exactly knowing where she was going and every turning, as was perceptible in her step and attitude. Blanche had come out first and was a few steps in advance, the other having paused to exchange a little badinage with the porters at the station; but presently Miss Fontaine heard the brisk steps of this young person coming after her down the country road, and stopped and turned round at the opening of a cross way. "Can you tell me," she said, "the way to Woodlands Farm?" There was a little flutter in her voice and she felt one of those foolish blushes, to which she was so subject, flush over her. Absurd! as if to ask such a simple question was betraying herself to a stranger. She was surprised by a responsive change in the other's looks, and a startled flash out of the blue-gray eyes which, now she came to look at them, seemed to her familiar, as if she had seen them before.



BLANCHE LEAVING HOME.

"Woodlands Farm! oh!" cried the young woman, "how funny that you should ask me! for I belong there."

"Do you indeed?" said Blanche. She looked at this new acquaintance more closely, a little startled, almost frightened, if the truth must be told. Belonged there! Standing opposite to her Blanche perceived all the imperfections in her, the "common" look, the trumpery ornaments she wore, the badly arranged dress. In what capacity could she belong there? She could not be a lady's maid. Persons of that profession, so far as Blanche's knowledge went, did not speak in that bold and free tone to ladies whom they met. She was puzzled and troubled, and did not know what to think.

"And I'm going there straight," said the young woman, "if you like I'll show you the way."

"You are very kind," said Blanche. Somehow the offer took away her breath. The young woman looked at her with an inquiry in those blue-gray eyes—(where had Blanche seen them before? they were the kind of eyes that seem loosely attached, that quicken and project with curiosity) they asked as plain as words, What do you want at Woodlands Farm? What is your business there?

They walked along for a little side by side. Blanche was very eager to question her companion, to find out something about the house, and what the family was like. But her lips were closed by some incomprehensible influence. She felt abashed, perplexed, realizing for the first time what her wild undertaking was: to present herself to an unknown family as betrothed to the son of the house, and to ask them to take her in and shelter her because of the unkindness of her own parents. It had seemed so perfectly simple last night. She had thought it the most natural thing, the one place where she had a right to be taken in and taken care of—where she must find a

natural support and advocacy. Who so fit as Edward's father to plead his son's cause?—or as Edward's mother to give protection and countenance to the girl whom he meant to marry? But somehow the look of this young woman, housemaid or dairymaid, or whatever she was, with her eyes coming half out of their sockets with curiosity, daunted this young lady more than words can say.

"Perhaps you were wanting country lodgings?" said the young woman. "We're all against it, but mother will have it. She says it's her little share—though there isn't much to be made by it—like the poultry don't you know, and the fruit."

"Oh!" said Blanche faintly. "I suppose then you are on the—home farm or something of that sort?"

"We are on all the farm there is," said the young woman. "Woodlands Farm—as has been a hundred years or more in our family. But farming's a poor trade now, as father always says, and we have to make up a bit in other ways. Mother and me and Georgie, we do all we can with the eggs and spring chickens, and father lets us have the orchard; but it isn't much as comes out of that. A lodger is a little bit of a help now and then, and mother would make you very comfortable—plenty of milk and fresh eggs and all that."

"Oh!" said Blanche again—and she added still very faintly, "Perhaps I have made some mistake;—or you could direct me. What I wanted to find was the house of Mr. Dewsbury. Not the farmer's—the Dewsburys'—of Woodlands—"

"To be sure," cried the young woman, "and who did you take him for if not the farmer! Why, we are the only Dewsburys in the parish, and this is the only Woodlands. And I'm the eldest, Kate!"

CHAPTER IV.

To describe the feelings of Blanche Fontaine arrested in the middle of that country road, having committed herself to the most tremendous step in life, left her home, thrown off her natural allegiance, and cast herself upon the world—and now to have the curtain of the future abruptly lifted for her by Kate Dewsbury of the Woodlands Farm—is more than words are equal to. She saw it all at a glance. Those were the same eyes that had looked at her so often from under Edward Dewsbury's eyelids. This was one of the humble folk of whom he had spoken with so much (as she thought) unnecessary hesitation. Heaven knows what in her ignorance she had imagined that to mean—simple country people, a rustic squire and lady, out of the way of the world. He had not deceived her. It was not from him she had received that idea. It was all folly, pure folly of her own. She stood still for a moment in the middle of the road, feeling as if she had been suddenly suffocated, unable to get her breath. She did not faint, but the light went out of her eyes for the moment, and all the earth and sky whirled round about her: she went on for a few steps mechanically as if she had suddenly become blind: her bag fell out of her hands—that bag with its pretty fittings, the silver-topped bottles, the ivory brushes, which she had brought with her, thinking that for a day or two at least her future sisters would supply all her more serious wants. Oh heavens! and this was one of her future sisters! She heard Kate Dewsbury's alarmed voice in her ears—"Oh, miss! what is the matter? You ain't used to be out in this heat. Sit down on the step, you poor dear, and lean your poor head on me. Dear, dear, there ain't a bit of shade or nothing, nor a drop of water nearer than our house."

"I have got some eau de Cologne in my bag," said Blanche faintly, coming a little to herself. Kate had picked up the bag, and looked at it with great curiosity and awe as Blanche opened it. The silver-topped bottles filled her with admiration, so did the dainty flimsy handkerchief which Blanche saturated so extravagantly with the pungent water. She to have recourse to eau de Cologne, a girl who did not know what faintness meant! It revived her however, and after a while she was able to go on walking slowly, with a sense of absolute downfall and exhaustion such as she had never felt before. Never had Blanche in all her life been so weak. She accepted the guidance of Kate as if she had been a little child.

"We ain't far off now," said the young woman soothingly. "Take your hold of me and I'll help you on. And mother's a kind soul. Whether you're thinking of the lodgings or not she'll be just as pleased to see you: and you can be quiet a bit in the parlour and come to yourself."

The poor girl was so entirely overthrown that she accepted everything with a kind of dull dependence upon her companion, and was led through the fields to a red house shaded by a few trees, and covered by the wild clematis in clouds of blossom, which comforted her a little : for, homely as it was, it might have been made by imagination, and even perhaps by clever hands and good taste, into something, humble indeed, but not entirely unlike what she had dreamed. Blanche was led however into a little parlour of a kind she was perfectly acquainted with, with a little greenish window, half blocked up by red geraniums, and a table in the centre with a red and blue cloth, and a little glistening black haircloth sofa upon which she was implored to lie down and rest. The mother came out full of solicitude, a fresh-looking country woman with a large clean white apron, put on hastily as the first expedient in a social emergency, and which she had not finished tying when she came forth from the kitchen in wonder and excitement. Nothing could have been more kind than this motherly soul. Her eyes did not dance with curiosity like her daughter's. She ran to fetch water, then to fetch milk, to do anything the poor young lady could want. "Oh, hold your tongue about the lodgings," she said, thrusting Kate aside with a vigorous push. "Let's get her well, poor thing. She's as white as a sheet." There were no cushions on the horsehair sofa except one covered with bead-work which Kate placed beneath the young stranger's head, but which her mother with an energetic hand drew away.

"I'd as soon lay my head on the kitchen hearth," she said ; "bring me a pillow out of the best bed."

"Oh," said Blanche, struggling to her feet, "it is not necessary ! Indeed it is not necessary ! Thank you so much, it was only—the sun : and I am quite well now."

"I don't doubt as it was only the sun : but you ain't quite well, my poor dear. Just you lie still and get a good rest. My man's coming in to his dinner, and I'll be busy for a bit : but you stay quiet here."

"Can you tell me when there is another train," said Blanche, "going to town ?"

"She means London, mother," said Kate, "and there ain't one till four o'clock."

"I hope, with a son there, that I know as town means London without none of your telling," said Mrs. Dewsbury. "Lord, there's your father and the bacon not dished, and you in your Sunday clothes ! I'll have to leave you, miss, for a little ; but just you stay quiet, and as soon as dinner's out o' the road I'll fetch you a cup of tea."

Presently the little fuss and commotion of the two voices over her head, of the kindly hands pushing her down on the sofa, more powerful in their impulse than Blanche was used to, but unmistakably charitable and kind, ended, and Blanche was



BLANCHE ARRIVES AT WOODLANDS FARM.

left by herself with an aching head, and a dismayed heart. She saw a big rural figure stalk past the window, and heard a heavy long step go through the little passage—a man with a ruddy round countenance adorned by ragged gray whiskers, with the familiar aspect of the cottage-farmer—and thought with a shudder that this was the man whom she had expected to open negotiations with her father, to treat with the Judge on equal terms. Blanche heard the stir in the kitchen as he came in hungry for his dinner, loudly demanding the cause of the delay; and guessed from the flutter and hurry of voices that the curious episode of the young lady shut up in the parlour was being told. It seemed to her that she could see the scene. The big wooden table drawn away as far as possible from the fire, the old farmer wiping his red-brown forehead, the mess of bacon and beans on the table. Blanche at home had seen cottage-life in all its aspects, the comfortable as well as the wretched. She saw everything that was passing as if she had been there. Another voice too fluttered in, a young and shrill one, which had been a moment before calling to the fowls in the backyard. She lay upon the little sofa paralyzed for a time, feeling as if she could not move, while her mind moved slowly taking in all that scene. And Edward Dewsbury! Where did he come in, how did he come in, to this bewildering *milieu*? And her own wild thought of taking refuge with his people as the natural and sagacious thing to do, and the letter which his father would write to the Judge, and the still more important letter which his mother—his mother! this kind, rough, motherly body—would write to Lady Fontaine! When this thought came over Blanche she burst wildly into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, and then hid her face in her hands. At this there was a sound of the pushing back of chairs in the kitchen and a rush to the parlour door.

"It's the hystericks as has took her," cried Mrs. Dewsbury, rushing in with her daughters at her heels.

Blanche raised her face to look at them, astonished—more than astonished—haughtily demanding with her eyes what they wanted to intrude thus upon her. The three stared at her bewildered and then retired one upon the other.

"She's maybe wanting her dinner. Ask her if she'd 'ave a bit o' bacon, mother," said the youngest girl.

"Husht, you gaby," cried the mother in a whisper. "I'll go and make her a cup o' tea."

Blanche recovered her wits after this interruption. Her first feeling had been one of utter despair as well as dismay. To the absolutism of youth it seemed as though the wild step she had taken, the flight from home, the intention she had of severing herself from her own family, and flinging herself upon his, was a final step, and that nothing was left her but to throw herself into their life, seeing that she had thus relinquished her own. But after a while this girl of her period began to see more clearly: and there came into her mind, like the way of salvation, the hour of that next train! Yes, it was a commonplace way enough of getting out of this extraordinary dilemma; but yet it was the easiest, simplest, the infallible way. She would go home like the prodigal: she would fling herself upon her mother's neck. She would say, I have been a fool, the worst of fools, but I have not done any harm. To make a little expedition into the country alone was no harm. Blanche knew the difference between mountains and molehills: she did not imagine for a moment that her reputation would be compromised, or an undying resentment awakened in the bosom of her parents when it was known. It made her head swim round again to think of going back; but yet there was the way before her simple as daylight. She rose and looked out of the little window over the red geraniums that blocked it up, and there was the road lying white in the sunshine, the way back into the world, her own world. She looked at her watch; it was but two o'clock. Two o'clock only, and the train not till four! Should she go away now, while they were occupied, steal away not to look that good woman in the face again? But she could not move a step without being heard. She roamed about the little room looking at all its wonderful treasures; how wonderful they were! there was a book or two, a volume of a boy's magazine bound, a volume of a common cyclopedia, compendium of knowledge, a little poetry book or collection of extracts in a shabby, showy binding, some little articles of spun glass, a few shells in fearful and wonderful constructions, a few photographs—Ah! one above all others constantly repeated. How was it that she had not seen it at once? a round schoolboy face with those eyes loose, projecting, like a pair of goggles; then the half-grown lad more advanced; then a head in a college cap:—then the man, not exactly as she knew him, but yet a

man—a young man in society, the ward of Mr. Flete of Fletehorn, a fellow of his college, a newly called barrister. Blanche felt her head again go round and round. What had he to do here?

And then there came upon the girl an acute and overwhelming sense of shame : had she not said a thousand times to herself and others, that distinctions of rank were nothing, that it depended on a man himself what he was, that to ask who was his father was the most contemptible of impertinences ? Ah ! but then she had not thought of his mother, and his sisters ; the people whom he ought to love, whom he ought to live with, whom he ought—oh, above all—to tell his bride of, to make known to her ! Her heart sank with shame to think that this sudden revelation had changed all her thoughts of him ; that it seemed to push him far off from her, to make him impossible, impossible ! Yet why ? for he was not changed by any such discovery : and oh ! how



BRINGING IN TEA.

contemptible on her, or any woman's, part to change her opinion of her lover because his family was simple and poor !

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Dewsbury entered carrying a tray. "Here, miss," she said, "I've boiled a nice fresh egg as you don't often get the like of in town as you call it, and a nice strong cup o' tea ; and see if that don't set you all to rights. Ah, you're looking at them photographs ! You would not think, would you now, that a gentleman like that belonged here ? But he do—quite the gentleman as you ever see, and a good son all the same, the best o' sons. You should just see the gown as he brought me, real silk and a beauty ! and for ever sending a five pound note or somethin' o' that sort. If ever a mother was proud I've got the right to be of my Ned."

"Perhaps the lady has seen him in town, mother," said Kate, "she do look at him so."

Blanche put down the photograph as if it had burned her fingers, but Mrs. Dewsbury, wholly occupied with her own subject, took no notice. "He's a going to get married," she said, "to a lady of title, a grand lady, one of them as you see their names in the papers—and another grand lift that'll give him. Oh, he's been a lucky boy ! and to think it was just Mr. Flete coming here, promiscuous like, for country lodgings that gave him his schooling and made a gentleman of him ! 'Mrs. Dewsbury, ma'am,' he said

to me, 'it's a shame wasting a bright boy like that on a farm.' 'And so it is, Mr. Flete,' says I, 'but we've got no money to advance him; for trade, even if it's only a good shop in the village, wants capital.' 'He's fit for more than a shop in a village,' says he, 'and I'll find the money, Mrs. Dewsbury.' Father, you know, he didn't like it at first, he said as it was taking the boy from us, and that he'd grow up to be ashamed of his father and mother. But not a bit! none o' them knows my Ned: he's been that kind and nice! My dear! don't you spoil your nice cup o' tea, putting water in it; there's nothing for putting your head to rights like a good strong cup o' tea."

"And do you know," said Blanche, "the lady—whom he is going to marry?"

"Ah, that's just the worst of it," said the good woman, "I don't believe as he'll ever bring her here. A lady o' title, you may think! in this bit of a little place. But I don't begrudge it, for it's for his good; she'll give him a great lift, and that's the chief thing; for what are we, to be thinkin' of ourselves? You don't eat a bit, miss."

"Oh, the tea—is what I want," said Blanche: it was strong and bitter, and to swallow it was no easy matter. "I suppose your son is—very much attached to the lady."

"She's deep in love with him anyhow," said Kate with a laugh.

"And who wouldn't be?" cried the mother. "I won't deny as from what he says it's mostly on her side—but that's far more often the case than folks think—and such a lift as it will be for him. Bless us all, but you're not even drinkin' your tea."

"I think I shall be better out of doors—I want air," said Blanche.

"Open the window a bit, Kate. Well, miss, if you will go—but I can't abide to see the good tea wasted as I thought would set you just right. What d'ye say, Kate?—Oh, about the lodgings; but I don't think the lady wants no lodgings—"

"Does your son know that you let lodgings?" said Blanche.

They all laughed a little. "Well, he don't, to tell the truth; but bless you, nobody comes here as knows him; and why shouldn't we put a trifle in our pockets with all the bad years we have had, and next to nothing for either hay or corn? Perhaps as you're not thinking of the lodgings you might like a basket of fresh eggs, or some of our plums to take to town?"

"Oh, yes, a basket of eggs," said Blanche; and with a fierce satisfaction she gave Edward Dewsbury's mother five shillings for the dozen, such a bargain as the mistress of Woodlands Farm had never made before. Good Mrs. Dewsbury made some little demur, but was satisfied that the rest of the money was for the basket which the visitor might have no opportunity to send back. The younger sister carried it for her to the station, full of wonder and questions as to why a lady should come by the twelve o'clock, and go by the four o'clock train. It was a wonder that grew upon the whole family as soon as her back was turned. But if any satisfaction came to them on the subject, it was not till long after, when the incident threw much light to Edward Dewsbury upon an episode in his life which he did not understand.

Blanche went back with such a tempest of outraged feeling in her heart as all her experience of heroines in books could not equal. She gave the eggs to a porter at Victoria, who thought her mad, but accepted the gift with enthusiasm; and went home trembling for the reception she should meet with, and the explanation she must make. But when she got to Portland Place, she discovered that her mother was out for her usual drive, and the household calmly confident aware that Miss Fontaine had gone to lunch with a friend. Blanche felt that her maid looked very curiously at her bag, and had remarked the absence of the ivory brushes and the silver-topped bottles; but that was all. And the earthquake that had happened, the convulsion of nature, the tremendous change of which the girl was conscious, passed, as if nothing had been but the tranquil sunshine and ordinary course of the calm July day.

After this there is not much to say. Her shame at the impulse to throw off her lover because of his low degree disappeared in the passionate revulsion of feeling with which she had heard of his indifference to herself, which probably was a mere fiction of his family to demonstrate his superiority. But it did not seem so to Blanche. She had never corresponded with Edward Dewsbury, and as the Judge spent the Long Vacation in the Tyrol with his family, and afterwards consented, as the least of several evils, to allow his daughter to learn to draw in Paris during the following winter—the name of that rising young barrister vanished from sight and sound as if he never had been, and Portland Place knew him no more.